

On My Mind

2/26/10

Most often mis-used in island settings are the English language words "ecotourism" and "pristine." Ecotourism has come to mean any tourist activity that has a "nature" aspect - to the extent that riding mountain bikes through the boonies, driving along a road lined with flowering trees, or snorkelling within site of eagle rays are probably described somewhere as eco-tourism activities.

But ecotourism - as originally coined and defined - encompasses far more. The shortest definition I've found comes from The International Ecotourism Society: "Responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people."

More detailed is one provided in Wikipedia: "Ecotourism (also known as ecological tourism) is responsible travel to fragile, pristine, and usually protected areas that strives to be low impact and (often) small scale. It purports to educate the traveler; provide funds for conservation; directly benefit the economic development and political empowerment of local communities; and foster respect for different cultures and for human rights."

And then there's the one adopted by The Nature Conservancy and the World Conservation Union (IUCN): "Environmentally responsible travel to natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and accompanying cultural features, both past and present) that promotes conservation, has a low visitor impact and provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local peoples."

Note the inclusion of tourist education, of local involvement, of economic benefit to the locale. Though there are many potential activities that the CNMI could develop that would qualify as true ecotourism, one cannot truthfully say that the CNMI presently offers ecotourism activities.

Almost more egregious is abuse of the word "pristine" - as in protecting the CNMI's pristine reefs, or restoring sites to their pristine condition, neither of which is do-able. CNMI's reefs no longer are pristine. Sites cannot be restored to "pristine" condition.

The definitions of pristine aren't quite as wordy. "In its original condition; unspoiled; clean and fresh as if new; spotless;" is the way *The New Oxford American Dictionary*, 2nd edition defines it.

"Remaining in a pure state, uncorrupted by civilization; remaining free from dirt or decay, clean; of, or relating to or typical of the earliest time or condition; primitive or original" - are the meanings given the word by the *American Heritage College Dictionary*, 4th ed.

In other words, there is little, if anything, still "pristine" on Saipan - maybe even on Rota or Tinian. The reefs may have been pristine at one time, but they're not now. And Marpi's desecrated forests may once have been pristine, but certainly not in the last 75 years or so.

Words are used to communicate. But if they are abused, mis-used, the communication is flawed, faulty. Let's not miscommunicate about what our islands have to offer.

Will it be a case of too little, too late? The handful of retirees who started the Commonwealth Retirees Association have finally not only taken action, but have won a round in their fight to protect future retiree benefits. After months spent getting organized, the CRA, this month, filed suit to intervene in the post-judgment proceedings of the Retirement Fund Board of Trustees' case against the government for its refusal to pay its full share in the Retirement Fund's defined benefit retirement plan.

As explained by Oscar Camacho, CRA's Secretary, at last night's CRA general membership meeting, the CRA move is in keeping with an order issued by the Honorable Judge Alex R. Munson to delay, for sixty days, the filing of a suit against the Northern Marianas Retirement Fund, the NMIRF Board of Trustees and Governor Fitial in federal court. That suit asked for the appointment of a "federal equity receiver" for the Retirement Fund, among other things.

In that order, Munson wrote, "*Here, weighing the factors outlined above, a limited stay of proceedings in this court is warranted. Such a stay will allow intervention in the Superior Court by interested parties to seek themselves - or to compel the Fund and its Board to pursue - post-judgment remedies in that court. The Superior Court has the power - and has already indicated its willingness to consider exercising its full powers - to issue orders sufficient to enable the Fund to satisfy its judgment.*"

In other words, Munson specifically provides an opportunity for other parties to join the suit in Superior Court for the purpose of finding ways to force the government to pay what it owes the Retirement Fund. And, in Judge Munson's opinion, the Superior Court has the authority to enforce whatever ways are found.

At a hearing this morning, Judge Kenneth L. Govendo granted the CRA's motion for permission to intervene. This now gives the CRA a chance to come up with its own proposals on what the government should do towards paying its arrears, and gives Govendo a chance to issue court orders to carry out those that are approved.

In the meantime, the threat of appointment of a receiver via the federal court remains. The 60-day stay ends on March 25 - unless one or the other party succeeds in getting it extended. Not only does the proposed receivership threaten the income of present retirees under the defined benefit plan - it also threatens the income of future retirees. Moreover, though the suit raises valid concerns, there are serious concerns as to credibility and reputation in regard to the originator of the suit.

The question is whether, within the allotted time frame, the CRA will be able to satisfy the federal court that its efforts stand some chance of success. Let us all fervently hope so!

Membership in the CRA was a major topic of discussion at last night's meeting of the CRA. A bill that would add a CRA member to the Board of Trustees had passed both houses of the legislature, and, so far as the CRA knew, was awaiting the governor's signature. Late today it was learned that the governor had vetoed the bill on February 12 - having sent no notice to any member of the CRA. The bill would have set a requirement that CRA membership reach 1,000 before it goes into effect - a number some viewed as unreasonably high (if both active and retired members are included, the total number of members of the Retirement Fund defined benefit plan is some 6,000). The high number was specified because, it was explained, legislators wanted to be certain that whoever was chosen did, in fact, represent a substantial number of members of the CRA, rather than a small but vocal subset.

Dismay was again expressed at the small number of retirees attending CRA meetings. The CRA appears to be on the move. It could do more - with more participants. Those interested in helping are asked to contact CRA Board member Juan M. Sablan, Ron Barrineau, Oscar C. Camacho, Richard Waldo, Agnes McPhetres, Juan I. Tenorio, David M. Sablan, or Pete J.L. Igitol.

The Department of Public Lands, which administers the homestead program, appears to have two web pages - what I thought a rather good one at www.dpl.gov.mp/whatwedo.php, another at www.dpl.gov.mp/new. The first is sadly lacking in any hard data: no numbers at all, no names, of other than clients. It would have been nice to know, for example, how much public land is still available, how much is under lease, how much has been designated for residential and agricultural homesteads, the number of staff, the size of its budget, how much income the existing leases are generating, who's in charge of what, etc. But maybe the latter, at least, is too difficult for the web master to keep up with, since it appears s/he hails from the east coast, given it's east coast time that is shown on each page. The "new" url is more wordy, but a hasty review indicates it appears to reveal far less than the first one.

An interesting anomaly: on the list of "clients" who hold long term leases, which appears in the first url, only three individual names appear: Jesus M. Castro, Arnold Palacios and Juan S. Torres. All the rest are company names.